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The emotional wellbeing of young people: school, further study, work and beyond¹



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Introduction

Educational and labour market pathways in the early post-school years are becoming increasingly diverse. A pertinent issue for those working with young people is how young people now navigate the transition from secondary school into post-school education, training and employment, and the impact of the different paths followed on their emotional wellbeing.

This paper has two aims:

1. To describe the cross-sectional relationship between emotional wellbeing and participation in a range of post-school education, training and labour market activities.
2. To assess whether movement between activities in the early post-school years is associated with changes in emotional wellbeing.

Previous research

A number of Australian studies have documented a significant relationship between education and labour market activities and the emotional wellbeing of young people. In general, persons in fulltime employment experience higher levels of wellbeing, persons who are unemployed or outside the labour force have lower levels of wellbeing, and students and part-time workers fall between these two extremes (e.g. AIHW, 2003; Mathers, 1996). In addition to these cross-sectional findings, longitudinal research has indicated that young people's movement between activities in the post-school years is associated with changes in their wellbeing (e.g. Feather & O'Brien, 1986;

Graetz, 1993; Winefield, Winefield, Tiggemann & Goldney, 1991). These studies have not, however, examined in detail how young people combine educational and labour market activities at the same point in time nor over a period of years. For example, does combining fulltime study with long hours of paid work have a negative impact on the wellbeing of young people?

Furthermore, the nature of the transition from school to work in Australia has undergone numerous changes since the collection of the data used in many of these studies. Young people's participation in Year 12 and post-secondary education and training activities has increased since the early 1980s. At the same time, the fulltime labour market participation rates of young people have fallen and their part-time participation rates have increased dramatically. Today, many young people move in and out of a range of activities in the early post-school years, including education, employment, underemployment and unemployment, and other activities outside the labour market. The net result is that the transition from school to fulltime work has become both longer and less clearly defined for many young people, and this may have implications for their wellbeing.

Data for this study: the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth

The Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (LSAY) project, which is jointly managed by the Australian Council for Educational Research and the Australian

¹This conference paper is based on a forthcoming report from the *Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth* research report series, entitled 'The emotional wellbeing of young people and the transition from school to further education, training and work' by Kylie Hillman and Julie McMillan. Reference is also made to results from previous LSAY research (Marks & Fleming, 1999).

Government Department of Education, Science and Training, examines the experiences of young people as they move from school into post-secondary education, training and work. A number of cohorts of young people have been surveyed as part of the LSAY program. In order to examine wellbeing in the early post-school years, this paper focuses on a sample of young people who were in Year 9 in 1995. The initial sample included 13,613 students from approximately 300 government, Catholic and independent schools across Australia. The students were first surveyed in their school in 1995; since that time, data on educational, training and labour market activities have been collected annually, while data on emotional wellbeing have been collected in most years. The analyses in this paper are based upon the 6095 young people who remained in the active sample in 2002. All analyses have been weighted to correct for the original sample design and attrition over subsequent years (Marks & Long, 2000)

Measures

Measures of emotional wellbeing were generated from respondents' assessments of how satisfied they were with various aspects of their lives in 1999 and 2002. Two aspects of wellbeing or satisfaction were analysed: *general satisfaction* (an index generated from eight items relating to your life at home, your social life, your life as a whole, what you do in your spare time, your standard of living, where you live, how you get along with people in general, and your independence – being able to do what you want); and *career satisfaction* (an index generated from four items relating to your career prospects, your future, the work you do

– at school, at home or in a job, and the money you get each week). Most sample members reported high levels of both general and career satisfaction at each of the time points examined. Due to the highly skewed nature of these variables, they were transformed to approximate a normal distribution for analytical purposes.

Separate activity measures were constructed for each year from 1999 to 2002. These measures distinguish between young people with very large time commitments in education, training and employment activities (*dual role*); those whose total time spent in one or a combination of education, training and employment activities was fulltime (*fully allocated*); those whose total time spent in one or a combination of education, training and employment activities was less than fulltime (*partially allocated*); and those who were not in education, training or employment (*unallocated*). The operational definition of the four groupings is provided below.

Dual role	fulltime students who were employed for 20 or more hours per week
Fully allocated	fulltime students who were employed for 0–20 hours per week; apprentices and trainees; fulltime workers; and part-time students who were employed for 20 or more hours per week
Partially allocated	part-time students who were employed for 0–20 hours per week; and part-time workers who were not enrolled in education or training
Unallocated	young people who were not in education, training or paid employment

In each of the early post-school years, over 70% of young people were engaged in fully allocated activities. Between 7 and 10% of young people, however, were combining fulltime study with long hours of paid employment in any given year (the dual role group). A further 14–21% were not engaged in education, training or employment on a fulltime basis (the partially allocated and unallocated groups).

The early post-school years

To examine the cross-sectional relationship between activities and wellbeing in the early post-school years, the experiences of the 1995 Year 9 cohort were examined in 1999 and again in 2002. For the majority of the cohort, 1999 was the first year after completing Year 12 and the modal age at the time of data collection was 18. By 2002, cohort members were further along the transition process and their modal age was 21. At both of these time points there was a small but significant association between satisfaction levels and post-school activities. In general, at both points in the transition process:

- those young people whose time was spent in dual or fully allocated activities reported higher levels of satisfaction than those who were partially allocated, who in turn were more satisfied than those who were unallocated; and
- the satisfaction levels of young people in dual activities and those in fully allocated activities, however, did not differ significantly (with the exception of career satisfaction in 1999, where those in dual activities reported *higher* levels of satisfaction than those in fully allocated activities).

The longitudinal nature of the LSAY data also permits an examination of whether young people who move between activities experience changes in their wellbeing. There were a large number of different pathways or sequences of activities followed by sample members across each of the years between 1999 and 2002. Of particular interest, was whether young people whose post-school pathways were typified by 'positive' activity changes experienced increased levels of wellbeing and conversely, whether those whose post-school pathways were typified by 'negative' activity changes experienced decreased levels of wellbeing. Hierarchical multiple regression analyses were conducted to assess whether a range of activity pathways influence general and career satisfaction at age 21 (in 2002). These analyses controlled for the effects of background characteristics (gender, language background and Year 12 completion) and prior satisfaction (at age 18, in 1999).

Preliminary analyses indicated that, in general, young people who remained in the same types of activities in each of the years from 1999 to 2002 displayed relatively stable levels of wellbeing throughout the period.

In contrast, the results of the regression analyses suggested that pathways typified by 'negative' activity changes were associated with decreases in wellbeing. In particular:

- persons who moved from dual or fully allocated activities into partially allocated or unallocated activities reported decreased general and career satisfaction compared to those who remained in dual/fully allocated activities; and

- persons who moved from partially allocated activities into unallocated activities reported decreased levels of career satisfaction compared to those who remained in partially allocated activities.

Evidence in support of an association between 'positive' activity changes and increased satisfaction was weaker.

- Large 'positive' changes in activities – moving from unallocated activities into dual or fully allocated activities – were associated with increased career satisfaction, but did not impact upon general satisfaction.
- Smaller 'positive' changes in activities – moving from unallocated into partially allocated activities, or moving from partially allocated into fully allocated activities – were not associated with satisfaction levels.

Beyond the early post-school years

Until now we have concentrated on a period early in the transition process, between the ages of 18 and 21. For many young people today, the transition process is not completed within this period. In order to examine the relationship between activities and wellbeing beyond the early post-school years, it is necessary to turn to the experiences of earlier cohorts of young people. The Youth in Transition (YIT) study, a precursor to the LSAY program, is a study of young people born in 1961, 1965, 1970 and 1975. The same measures of wellbeing that were collected from the LSAY 1995 Year 9 cohort were also collected from the YIT participants. Marks and Fleming (1999) analysed data on the oldest cohort up to age 33 (in 1994), on the second cohort up to age 30 (in 1995),

on the third cohort up to age 24 (in 1994), and on the fourth cohort up to age 20 (in 1995). Consistent with our analyses of the early post-school years, Marks and Fleming (1999) reported that:

- persons who were unemployed or not in the labour force had significantly lower levels of wellbeing than other young people; and
- the detrimental effect of unemployment on wellbeing did not differ according to age, at least among the age groups analysed.

Discussion

This research has highlighted the association between young people's post-school activities and pathways and their emotional wellbeing. Young people who are occupied fulltime in education, training, employment or a combination of these activities report higher levels of satisfaction, in areas related to their careers and their lives in general, than young people who are occupied in these activities only part-time. Those who are occupied part-time are in turn more satisfied than those who are not in education, training or employment. Moving between activities also impacts upon satisfaction levels. Although these relationships are relatively weak, they remain evident throughout the transition process, from the late teenage years through to when young people are in their early thirties.

Of interest was the lack of difference in satisfaction levels between the dual role and fully allocated groups. The dual role group consisted of those young people who were combining fulltime study or training with twenty or more hours of paid work per week. Other research has shown this group to be at greater risk of dropping out of higher

education. However, the different time commitments of the dual and fully allocated groups do not appear to be influencing their satisfaction with their career prospects, their social lives, their spare time or their lives in general.

Participation in education and labour market activities is related more strongly to career satisfaction than to general satisfaction. The relationship between general satisfaction and post-school pathways is important though, and warrants attention, as it indicates that involvement in part-time work not coupled with fulltime study, being unemployed and withdrawal from the labour force can have a negative effect on young people's levels of satisfaction with broader, more social aspects of their lives. Conversely, engagement in some form of purposeful educational or labour market activity does have benefits for the healthy functioning of young people that go beyond having sufficient income or a future career to affect how they see their lives more generally.

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